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Political Forces Come Under New Scrutiny Of Psychology

By DANIEL GOLEMAN

IN a recent rapprochement, psychologists and political scientists are merging disciplines to form a new field, political psychology. The mutual interest comes from psychologists who are applying their skills to the political arena and political scientists who are coming to appreciate the importance of psychology in the world of politics.

Political psychology is still in the main an academic discipline rather than an active force in international diplomacy or domestic politics. But current research indicates that the discipline can yield valuable information about Soviet behavior, for example, and the problems inherent in a military policy based on deterence.

Proponents of the discipline assert that it has the potential of bringing greater clarity and soundness to government decisions and perhaps even of improving the manner in which governments perceive and deal with each other. Much of the new psychological interest has centered on international politics.

"There has been a crucial dimension missing" in politics, according to Roger Walsh, a psychiatrist who wrote the book "Staying Alive: The Psychology of Human Survival" (New Science Library). "Crises between nations have been viewed in political, economic and military terms, but very little has been said about the fact that these problems are also expressions of psychological needs and fears, too."

Process of international relations has special allure for research.

Psychologal elements have always been conspicuously at work in international relations, but now more and more psychologists themselves are scrutinizing these factors. The issue of deterrence is a case in point. The MX missile, whatever its military usefulness may be, is often seen as a weapon whose importance is largely symbolic, more a tool for manipulating perceptions than for fulfilling a real military need.

Steven Kull, a psychologist at the Center for International Security and Arms Control at Stanford University, said that to make a symbolic weapon potent, politicians must act as if they truly believed that it was a genuine military tool. A psychological game ensues in which they must make public pronouncements that do not agree with their own military assessments. Along the way they may find themselves engaging in a kind of psychological "doublethink," managing to hold two antithetical views at the same time. "Pentagon officials have even publicly admitted this doublethink, but the public seems to have taken it on, too," Dr. Kull said. "Everyone seems to reconcile the paradox by imagining that somewhere else there is a mass of people for whose benefit it is crucial to maintain the illusion that we can gain advantage by building these weapons."

Political psychologists argue that the clear awareness of such mental maneuvering allows for more realistic decision making in response to it. A weapon system that is clearly symbolic, for instance, would call for a different response than one that had a real military mission.

In recent years, a growing list of eminent psychologists and psychiatrists have become concerned with international relations. Notable among them are B. F. Skinner of Harvard, who applies behaviorism to the causes of the arms race; Robert Jay Lifton of Yale, who has applied psychoanalytic insights to understanding the impact of nuclear weapons, and Jerome Frank of Johns Hopkins University, who wrote the book "Sanity and Survival in the Nuclear Age," an early effort to treat world politics in a psychological framework. In the 50's, Erich Fromm exemplified a tradition in psychoanalysis, dating back to the early Freudians, which saw an important role for psychoanalysis in social criticism. Among the growing number of scholars currently engaged in the field, Herbert Kelman of Harvard is applying principles of conflict resolution to the basic disagreement among Arabs and Israelis in the Middle East.

Few political scientists, until now, have been receptive to the psychological approach. "Most political scientists are thin on psychology, while most psychologists are naïve about international politics, but each can profit enormously from the other," said Robert Jervis, a political scientist at Columbia University who has been at the forefront of the merger of the two fields.

Still Viewed as Untested

While psychologists have been quick to embrace politics as a domain where their expertise could be useful, political scientists as a whole have been more reticent. "Although political psychology is now seen as a legitimate topic in poitical science," Dr. Jervis added, "it is still viewed as untested." Nevertheless, when a program that will finance 40 scholars to bring new approaches, such as psy-

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chology, to the study of international security was announced earlier this year by the Social Science Research Council, there were 1,000 requests for applications.

The journal Political Psychology, published by the International Society for Political Psychology, which was founded in 1978 by scholars from several disciplines, has emerged as the major forum for the present work. One recent article focuses on an individual, David A. Stockman, President Reagan's director of the Office of Management and Budget, rather than a nation or political group. In it, Richard Merelman, a political scientist at the University of Wisconsin, attempts to describe the various psycholgical elements that motivate Mr. Stockman. The article results from the kind of analysis that has often fueled debate over the validity of psychological interpretation done at a distance.

Dr. Merelman sees in Mr. Stockman a surface layer of Machiavellianism. Underlying it he sees the kind of intense sense of conscience embodied in Puritan ideology, a strain of conscience that must be at odds with the more pragmatic side. Beneath all of that Dr. Merelman sees a man who fears being abandoned, a man with a great need to be dependent on a strong mentor. Thus, Dr. Merelman hopes to explain how Mr. Stockman could seem to be so pragmatic and loyal and yet, in comments that invariably cause him trouble, admit to holding principles at odds with the policies he implements.

Simplistic Thinking and War

Among the more inventive studies has been that of Phillip Tetlock of University of California at Berkeley. Dr. Tetlock took public statements of Russian and American leaders from 1945 to 1983 and applied a sophisticated linguistic analysis of the complexity of thought revealed in the statements. For example, an American President might see the Soviet Union only as an expansionist power, or he might see it as a nation with complex motivations. This mode of thinking, according to Dr. Tetlock, can be assessed with scientific reliability from public statements.

Over four decades, Dr. Tetlock found a direct relationship between complex thinking and the making of treaties on the one hand and simplistic thinking and acts of war on the other. "The Soviets seem to signal their intent," he said. "Their cognitive simplicity increases sharply in the months before they make a hostile move, and their complexity increases just before a treaty."

There are several common psychological skews to which those involved in international relations fall prey, says Dr. Jervis. His book "Perception and Misperception in International Politics" (Princeton University Press) is regarded as the seminal statement of principles underlying political psychology. In it, he draws heavily on cognitive psychology.

"Once you have a belief," Dr. Jervis said in an interview, "it influences how you perceive all other relevant information. Once you see a country as hostile, you are likely to interpret ambiguous actions on their part as signifying their hostility. A more neutral observer might see many other possible explanations."

"In the political arena, people don't realize how their opinions shape their conclusions," Dr. Jervis added. "They see all information as independent confirmations of their view, not realizing — as cognitive psychologists have shown — that their bias preselects the information they notice and determines how they will construe it."

Policy of Nuclear Deterrence

Dr. Jervis cites as an example the tendency of those on different sides of the debate over a nuclear test ban to view very different facets of the issue all in the same way.

"People often believe that the policy they favor is better than the alternatives on several logically independent dimensions," according to Dr. Jervis. "For example, those who favored a ban on nuclear testing believed that the health hazards from testing were high, that continued testing would yield few military benefits, and that a treaty would open the door to further arms control agreements. Opponents disagreed on all three counts."

This kind of consistency, Dr. Jervis notes, is suspect "because there is no reason to expect the world to be so neatly arranged that a policy will be superior on all dimensions."

The policy of deterrence has emerged as a major topic for analysis by political psychologists.

"History shows that the psychological assumptions underlying deterrence — that greater threats will make an adversary back down — just don't hold up," said Ned Lebow, a professor of government at Cornell University. Dr. Lebow, who was formerly a scholar-in-residence at the C.I.A. and a professor of strategy at the National War College, is a political scientist who finds it fruitful to use both psychological and historical methods.

In a recent study he analyzed 15 historical cases of international confrontations — for example, the American decision during the Korean War to cross the 38th Parallel — in which deterrence was a prime policy of the parties involved. He found that while deterrence was often the rationale for moves and counter-moves, the actual outcome of the encounter seemed to depend on other considerations.

"Most nations begin wars when they are weak at home, not strong," Dr. Lebow said in an interview. "And once they decide to pursue the challenge, they become insensitive to information suggesting it won't work. Deterrence, which tries to make an opponent's hostile actions too costly to carry out, assumes you know his value calculations, but most often you don't. You may be assuming he's paying careful attention to military considerations, when in fact he's preoccupied by domestic issues."

Balance-of-Power and Ego

While Dr. Lebow and other political scientists have turned to cognitive psychology to analyze biases in international relations, a different approach is taken by those with a psychoanalytic bent. Typical of these efforts is the work of Steve R. Pieczenik, a psychiatrist who has been a deputy assistant secretary of state.

"Just as states of vulnerability in an individual lead to anxieties which are handled by ego-defense mechanisms," Dr. Pieczenik said, "national anxieties arise from states of balance-of-power vulnerabiity."

Writing in the American Journal of Psychotherapy, Dr. Pieczenik has argued that the perceptions of one country toward another are filtered by these defenses. The more threatening one nation perceives another to be, the more extreme the psychological defenses it will rely upon.

The most extreme defenses include projection, where one perceives one's own hostility to be coming from one's enemy; distortion, in which one twists facts to make them more acceptable; and denial, where one ignores altogether discomforting facts. These extreme defenses, Dr. Peiczenik contends, were used toward China in the period when the United States refused to recognize its political existence.

In the same period, Dr. Pieczenik said, the United States used less extreme perceptual distortions toward Taiwan, particularly idealization and fantasies of omnipotence, to maintain "the fantasy that the idealized General Chaing Kai-Shek would one day return to mainland China and destroy the Communists."